



## Psalm 123 - Supplication for Mercy

### A Song of Ascents.

#### Introduction

This is a community lament, as the references to ‘we,’ ‘our’ and “us” show. As the fourth psalm titled ‘A Song of Ascents’, it envisions a situation in which the faithful pilgrims feel themselves to be the objects of scorn and contempt – whether from the unfaithful in Israel or from unbelieving Gentiles among whom they must pass, the psalm does not say, but the words are general enough to include both. The psalm goes beyond simply asking for a safe journey; it seeks relief from the scorn, a visible sign of God’s mercy, which might even benefit those showing scorn. Christians should have no difficulty in praying the same way.

It is another in the series of psalms sung by pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem at the time of an annual festival. These songs give us a pattern of preparation to meet with God and his people. For more on the Song of Ascents psalms, refer to the introduction to Psalm 120.

Luther commented, “This Psalm (as you see) is but short, and therefore a very fit example to show the force of prayer not to consist in many words, but in fervency of spirit. For great and weighty matters may be comprised in a few words, if they proceed from the spirit and the unspeakable groanings of the heart, especially when our necessity is such as will not suffer any long prayer. Every prayer is long enough if it be fervent and proceed from a heart that understands the necessity of the saints.”

#### Psalm 123:1-2 - Our Eyes Look to You, O Lord.

The first section describes the way God’s faithful look trustingly toward God for help as <<*until he has mercy upon us*>> makes clear. The image of servants looking to their master and a maidservant to her mistress has suggested to some the idea of waiting for orders. However, the context shows that the image is that

of waiting patiently and trustingly for God to act; the psalm is concerned with gaining God's help.

<sup>1</sup> To you I lift up my eyes,  
O you who are enthroned in the heavens!

### Psalm 123:1

To you I lift up my eyes. The psalmist declares his intention and action - to lift up his eyes to the Lord. This means that his eyes are not on his circumstances or self, but on the Lord. Charles Spurgeon commented, "It is good to have some one to look up to. The psalmist looked so high that he could look no higher. Not to the hills, but to the God of the hills he looked."

O you who are enthroned in the heavens! By remembering where God is, the psalmist grows in trust and confidence: <<*In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple*>> (Isaiah 6:1). Earth may have no mercy or help, but heaven has plenty of both and more: <<*Father of orphans and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation*>> (Psalm 68:5).

There is a progression in these Psalms of Ascent, beginning with Psalm 120:

- In Psalm 120 God's people lament their surroundings.
- In Psalm 121 God's people lift their eyes to the hills of Zion.
- In Psalm 122 God's people delight in the house of the Lord.
- In Psalm 123 God's people look above the hills to the Lord in heaven.

<sup>2</sup> As the eyes of servants  
look to the hand of their master,  
as the eyes of a maid  
to the hand of her mistress,  
so our eyes look to the Lord our God,  
until he has mercy upon us.

### Psalm 123:2

As the eyes of servants look to the hand of their master. The idea is like a waiter or a butler standing behind their master seated at dinner. The servant looks to the hand of their masters for the slightest indication of need or want, to instantly meet that need. With that same intensity, devotion, and steadfastness the psalmist looks to God.

The picture of the servants looking to the hands of the master suggests at least three things:

- **Dependence:** The hands of the master provide all that is needed.
- **Submission:** The hands of the master direct the servant's work.
- **Discipline:** The hands of the master correct the servant.

So our eyes look to the Lord our God is reminiscent of David: *<<My eyes are ever towards the Lord, for he will pluck my feet out of the net>>* (Psalm 25:15). The sense is that the psalmist waited to mention God by name, so as to build a sense of anticipation. The looking is fully described before the one looked to is named. Spurgeon commented, "Creation, providence, grace; these are all motions of Jehovah's hand, and from each of them a portion of our duty is to be learned; therefore should we carefully study them, to discover the divine will."

Until he has mercy upon us. This is how long the psalmist will focus his attention towards the Lord. He does not demand an immediate answer, but will persevere patiently until the Lord extends his mercy.

#### Psalm 123:3-4 - Have Mercy on Us at Last, O Lord.

The wait for mercy (v.2) becomes a prayer, have mercy upon the singer. The specific mercy is relief from those who show contempt and scorn toward the faithful pilgrims. Those who are at ease can refer to unfaithful Israelites who do not trouble themselves with piety, preferring to enjoy luxury instead, for example: *<<Rise up, you women who are at ease, hear my voice; you complacent daughters, listen to my speech>>* (Isaiah 32:9), and: *<<Alas for those who are at ease in Zion, and for those who feel secure on Mount Samaria, the notables of the first of the nations, to whom the house of Israel resorts!>>* (Amos 6:1); or it can apply to Gentiles indifferent to the true God: *<<And I am extremely angry with the nations that are at ease; for while I was only a little angry, they made the disaster worse>>* (Zechariah 1:15). Likewise the proud are arrogant in their unbelief: *<<Rise up, O judge of the earth; give to the proud what they deserve!>>* (Psalm 94:2). At many times during the history of God's people, they are under threat from those who hold power.

<sup>3</sup> Have mercy upon us, O Lord, have mercy upon us,  
for we have had more than enough of contempt.

#### Psalm 123:3

Have mercy upon us, O Lord. The psalmist was not content just to wait for mercy; he begged for it. He demonstrated that waiting on the Lord is not a passive thing. He repeated the request for mercy, showing the intensity of his plea. The master he looked to would look upon him and help.

For we have had more than enough of contempt. The psalmist needed God's intervention and mercy because he felt filled with the contempt put on him by others: <<*He said to them, 'Elijah is indeed coming first to restore all things. How then is it written about the Son of Man, that he is to go through many sufferings and be treated with contempt?'*>> (Mark 9:12), <<*He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt*>> (Luke 18:9), and: <<*Even Herod with his soldiers treated him with contempt and mocked him; then he put an elegant robe on him, and sent him back to Pilate*>> (Luke 23:11). Derek Kidner noted, "It is illuminating that contempt is singled out for mention. Other things can bruise, but this is cold steel. It goes deeper into the spirit than any other form of rejection."

- 4 Our soul has had more than its fill  
of the scorn of those who are at ease,  
of the contempt of the proud.

#### Psalm 123:4

Our soul has had more than its fill of the scorn of those who are at ease. This scorn is never easy to bear, but it is especially painful when it comes from those who seem to be at ease, who seem to have few problems or difficulties in life. Spurgeon observed, "This had become the chief thought of their minds, the peculiar sorrow of their hearts. Excluding all other feelings, a sense of scorn monopolised the soul and made it unutterably wretched." And again, "The injurious effect of freedom from affliction is singularly evident here. Place a man perfectly at ease and he derides the suffering godly, and becomes himself proud in heart and conduct."

The contempt of the proud. This made the contempt heaped on the psalmist even worse - knowing it came from the proud and arrogant. Yet he was satisfied to leave the matter here, waiting for God's mercy. Spurgeon observed, "The proud think so much of themselves that they must needs think all the less of those who are better than themselves. Pride is both contemptible and contemptuous." Nevertheless, this psalm is filled with the unspoken confidence that the mercy of God will triumph over the contempt of the proud. Kidner noted that contempt "can be an honour (Acts 5:41), and it is something Christ himself accepted and made redemptive."